

EMORY DEPARTMENT OF PSYCHIATRY AND BEHAVIORAL SCIENCES KUDOS
DECEMBER 2025

REMEMBER

Please send me your accomplishments, program/team activities, and personal updates for the January 2026 Kudos

SAVE THE DATES

Upcoming Faculty Development Seminar

The next faculty development seminar will be held on

- Wednesday February 4, 2026 from 9:00-10:30am - The topic will be “Strategies for Successfully Navigating Power Structures and Social Dynamics within the Department/Health System/Organization” and the panelists will be Peter Ash, Justine Welsh, Michael Treadway, Chanda Graves, and Kelly Skelton. Zoom: <https://zoom.us/j/6213030759?omn=95441734504>

Upcoming Writing Groups

The Faculty Writing Group is the first Wednesday of every month from 8:00-9:00am. These meetings are on [Zoom](#). This group is for faculty including adjunct faculty.

SPOTLIGHTS

FACULTY SPOTLIGHT: Rachel Waford, PhD

Rachel Waford is an assistant professor with a half-time appointment in the Hubert Department of Global Health at the Rollins School of Public Health, and half-time appointment in the Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences at Emory School of Medicine. In her role at RSPH she teaches 1-2 courses per year, advises first-year MPH students and mentors MPH and doctoral students. She is a co-PI on a project exploring the experiences of Georgia’s community service boards (CSBs) to understand what is needed to better support these safety net community mental health programs to serve Georgia’s uninsured and underinsurance populations. She also co-leads the RSPH Mental Health Working Group, one of six research accelerator groups developed by RSPH to facilitate faculty collaboration around shared interests across the six RSPH departments.

In her role at Emory SOM Rachel serves as a lead psychologist in the Clinical and Research Program for Psychosis at Grady where she provides direct clinical care, supervision and training across the Clinical High Risk for Psychosis (CHRp) Project ARROW (first episode), and PSTAR (Clozapine/treatment-resistant schizophrenia and long-term care) clinics. She works with psychology trainees and psychiatry residents to expand knowledge and skills around psychotherapy and assessment for psychosis. Rachel also focuses on program development where she is working with her team to create a centralized intake and assessment program across the psychosis programs, expand EBTs and services and increase care continuity and coordination among the programs. She also serves as the practicum director for the Emory/Grady practicum sites.

Outside of Emory, Rachel is a contract psychologist with CHOA where she oversees program development for the new Early Psychosis program at the Zalik Center. She also serves as the vice chair of the board of directors for Community Friendship, Inc and on the adolescent advisory council for Skyland Trail. She is a member of multiple professional organizations (e.g., ACBS, APA, GPA, and ISPS) and a reviewer for multiple journals related to clinical psychology, mental health and global mental health.

Rachel first decided to pursue clinical training in schizophrenia while working as an inpatient mental health technician during her undergraduate degree. Since then she has learned about courage, persistence and resilience from individuals with lived experience. She is endlessly inspired by their recovery journeys, and grateful to support individuals as they develop meaningful narratives around psychosis while also strengthening relationships with personal values and working toward future goals.

Rachel noted three formative experiences in her career trajectory. First was the opportunity to train and receive her PhD at the University of Louisville under the mentorship of Rich Lewine. Here she was able to deepen her interests and develop specific research topics inspired by clinical interactions on the inpatient unit during graduate practica. A second formative experience occurred during her internship training in first episode psychosis at the PREP FEP clinic at Harvard Medical School/Massachusetts Mental Health Center. She finally saw people get better – not just stabilize to leave a hospital. It broadened her idea of what was possible with effective, coordinated care. A third formative experience occurred during her postdoctoral fellowship at Emory University and Grady Health System. She had a wonderful mentor, Steve Walfish, who introduced the possibility of private practice focused on young people and families experiencing psychosis in order to follow her passion and address the local need (pre-ARROW/PSTAR!). Prior to this private practice was not even on her radar. Following Steve's guidance, Rachel remained in private practice serving this community for 10 years until returning to Grady in December 2024 to join the Grady psychosis programs.

Rachel is looking forward to growing with the psychosis programs at Grady. There are so many exciting opportunities ahead to expand services, collaborate with clients and families with lived experience and connect with colleagues across the state and region who are invested in this work. Rachel and her team are currently working with a group of Georgia colleagues to develop a harmonized psychosis assessment battery across the state. She would also love to create a psychosis training program so more trainees get experience serving this population. Now that she is back at Grady, Rachel is looking forward to settling in for the next chapter of her career!

Outside of work, Rachel enjoys spending time with her 5-year-old son, Levon, husband, Jared and their pup Dudley. They love to bike on the beltline and spend time in their EAV neighborhood. Rachel also enjoys running, cooking and practicing yoga. In January 2026, she will begin yoga teacher training to earn her 200-hour certification.

ADJUNCT FACULTY SPOTLIGHT: Smitha Bhandari, MD

Smitha Bhandari is an adjunct assistant professor in psychiatry and behavioral sciences. Most of her week is spent at the Path Group of Atlanta, which is a therapy and psychiatry outpatient practice in Buckhead. She treats children and adults for a variety of psychiatric diagnoses. In addition, she consults with attorneys on forensic issues such as child witness reliability, criminal defense and prosecution and plaintiff evaluations. She really likes having the balance between clinical work with children and forensic consultation with attorneys.

As an adjunct faculty member in the department, Smitha teaches a year-long seminar focusing on child and adolescent issues in forensic psychiatry and life after fellowship/private practice.

What Smitha really enjoys about her role at Emory is working with fellows in what is often their last year of training and helping them see a glimpse into the "real world." She enjoys helping the fellows think through their future goals and mentoring them on a personal level.

What people would be surprised to learn about Smith is she has three kids and three dogs!

STAFF SPOTLIGHT: Diona James

Diona James serves as the clinical business manager for Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences at Grady, supporting faculty and leadership across business operations, staffing, onboarding and systems coordination. Much of her work focuses on translating institutional policies into workflows that actually work for people. In parallel, Diona is completing a Master of Public Health in Prevention Science at the Rollins School of Public Health, with plans to graduate in summer 2026.

Before Emory, Diona worked in community-based and systems-focused roles in Cleveland, including fellowships and positions within public and philanthropic institutions. Those experiences shaped how she thinks about institutions from the inside out.

Diona enjoys bringing clarity to complex systems, especially where expectations, capacity and structure do not quite line up. She is motivated by helping close those gaps so faculty and staff can focus on their work rather than navigating the system around them.

Diona has intentionally built her career inside institutions, starting with community-based work and moving into increasingly operational roles. That path has given her a practical understanding of how decisions actually move through systems. She also draws from a background in medical anthropology, which shapes how she approaches organizational culture, operations and decision-making in US academic medicine.

Looking to the future, Diona is interested in continuing to grow as a systems-oriented leader in academic medicine, with a focus on operational clarity, governance and sustainable workforce design. Long-term, she hopes to work at the intersection of administration, policy and population health.

Outside of work, Diona enjoys writing and reflective thinking and maintains a regular yoga practice, which helps her stay grounded.

TRAINEE SPOTLIGHT: Caroline Stiles, PsyD

Caroline Stiles is currently a postdoctoral psychology resident at Emory. She works primarily with the consultation-liaison psychiatry service at Grady and spends some time with the Nia Project as well. She has also enjoyed becoming a peer supporter for the Emory at Grady community this year.

Caroline graduated from Mercer University's clinical psychology program in May 2025. Last year, she completed her doctoral internship at Charleston Area Medical Center in Charleston, WV. Her time there included roles in a high-risk obstetrics clinic, eating disorder treatment program, inpatient and CL psychiatry teams in the hospital and outpatient clinic providing a range of intervention and assessment services.

One of Caroline's favorite things about her job is getting to be a part of a purpose-driven community. Each encounter she has with a patient, provider or learner connects her to a shared sense of purpose, and she deeply values the opportunity to work in a place that strives for compassion, justice and humanity in healthcare.

Caroline's interest in interdisciplinary practice began when she volunteered for a hospice organization in college. From there, she chose Mercer's program for its emphasis on health psychology and eventually did a practicum with Grady's CL service. She also worked in a residential eating disorder treatment center during graduate school, which inspired her research on eating disorders in under-studied populations, such as pregnant people and rural communities. Caroline got to combine all of her interests during the internship in West Virginia, and her work with the high-risk obstetrics clinic solidified her passion for advocacy and service through integrated care. Finally, she is so glad to have returned to Grady's CL service for postdoc. The variety, acuity and teamwork involved have combined to create a truly incomparable learning experience she hopes to savor for the rest of the year.

Looking to the future, Caroline hopes to continue focusing her career on clinical work in interdisciplinary academic medical settings. At the end of the day, the fulfillment she finds in her work comes from small but meaningful moments of connection with patients and colleagues. These moments are at the heart of Caroline's goals for the future, and they drive her other aspirations to expand access to care, teach others in the field and pursue higher levels of training and certification in clinical health psychology.

Outside of work, Caroline enjoys swimming, running and otherwise being outside with her husband. Now that she has made it through graduate school, Caroline has also begun reading for fun again. She especially loves satirical novels.

MENTOR SPOTLIGHT: Erica Duncan, MD *(Written by Opal Ousley, PhD and Yilang Tang, MD, PhD)*

Erica has been an inspiring role model as a physician-researcher for many years. Her remarkable ability to balance patient care with rigorous research is truly impressive. As a mentor, she is always approachable, flexible and consistently provides the support needed for her mentees to thrive. She is knowledgeable in so many aspects, and her skills in guiding new faculty to set realistic goals and helping them achieve those goals, are exceptional. Erica's mentoring style is flexible and non-judgmental, encouraging trainees to define and pursue their own career paths. We are particularly impressed by her commitment to scientific integrity: she treats data with the utmost seriousness and interprets findings with extreme care and precision. While she may not be the most prolific researcher, her dedication to quality is evident in every publication she authors. We have also learned from her example on how to treat collaborators with respect and professionalism. One of the most valuable lessons gained from working with Erica is this: as a mentor, your role is to help mentees grow in the direction they choose—not in the way you want them to grow. This is the advice we strive to follow and hope to pass on to others.

PROGRAM SPOTLIGHT: Emory/Grady Medical-Psychiatry Unit

The Emory/Grady Medical–Psychiatry Unit (MPU) is a 16-bed, high-acuity, fully integrated inpatient unit designed to care for adults with concurrent medical illness and acute psychiatric needs. The program serves patients whose medical complexity exceeds the capabilities of traditional psychiatric units and whose psychiatric or behavioral acuity cannot be safely managed on standard medical or surgical floors. As part of a large urban safety-net hospital and Georgia's only Level I trauma center, the MPU cares for a particularly vulnerable population, including individuals with severe mental illness and medically significant self-injury or trauma complicated by psychiatric decompensation.

The MPU was developed to address long-standing gaps in care for patients requiring simultaneous, high-level medical and psychiatric treatment. Prior to its creation, these patients often experienced prolonged hospital stays, repeated transfers, safety challenges and fragmented care. Collaboration among Grady Behavioral Health, hospital leadership and Emory departments of medicine and psychiatry, combined with external consultation from national MPU experts, allowed the program to move from proposal to operational unit, opening in October 2023.

The MPU's defining feature is its true integration of medical and psychiatric care at the attending, nursing and systems levels. The unit is primarily staffed by dual-trained internal medicine–psychiatry physicians who provide continuous, on-unit care and jointly manage both medical and psychiatric treatment. It is currently the only known unit worldwide in which all patients receive care from a treatment team that includes a dually

trained internal medicine–psychiatry attending physician. The physical environment was built to meet full medical inpatient standards while incorporating psychiatric safety features. Unit capabilities include a secure milieu, private rooms, dialysis capability, negative pressure rooms and spaces for therapeutic programming. Unlike consult-based models, psychiatric care on the MPU is fully embedded in daily operations, allowing for timely decision-making, coordinated treatment and safer management of involuntary care when indicated.

Care on the MPU is delivered by a highly interdisciplinary team. Dual-trained med-psych attending physicians provide daytime coverage with overnight APP support. Nurses, behavioral health technicians and social workers—employed by Grady Behavioral Health—are cross-trained to function at the intersection of medical and psychiatric acuity. Social workers play a central role in disposition planning, involuntary treatment processes and coordination with state and community resources. A licensed mental health clinician and a certified peer specialist provide individual and group psychotherapy, formal safety planning and post-discharge follow-up. Ancillary team members, including a chaplain and registered dietitian, contribute longitudinal expertise in managing complex spiritual distress and severe malnutrition related to psychiatric illness. Daily interdisciplinary huddles ensure shared situational awareness and coordinated care.

The MPU operate through close collaboration among Grady Behavioral Health and the Emory School of Medicine Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences and Medicine Departments. Faculty are hired under the Department of Medicine, but have joint appointments in Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences. Faculty maintain clinical roles across the health system, strengthening bidirectional collaboration. The unit works closely with the Grady psychiatric consult-liaison service, emergency department, medical/surgical services and ICU teams. As an academic service, the MPU serves as a training site for medical students, internal medicine residents, psychiatry residents and combined med-psych residents, contributing to the educational missions of multiple departments and fostering interdisciplinary learning.

A less visible but essential contributor to the MPU's success is the level of specialized training and staffing continuity required to sustain high-acuity integrated care. Staff do not rotate or “float” from other units, allowing team members to develop deep familiarity with patients' evolving medical and psychiatric presentations and with one another. This continuity fosters a close-knit, highly collaborative unit culture.

The daily interdisciplinary treatment team meeting, while centered on patient care, also serves important secondary functions that support team cohesion and well-being. It provides structured opportunities to debrief challenging cases and clinical situations, helping to mitigate burnout, while also creating space for informal connection and relationship-building among staff. These shared experiences strengthen trust, psychological safety and mutual support—factors that ultimately enhance staff satisfaction and the quality of patient care.

Individuals and institutions interested in learning more about the MPU can connect with program leadership, request site visits or engage through academic presentations and publications. The unit participates in national forums such as the AMP MPU Consortium and is expanding scholarly activity, including outcomes research and multicenter collaboration. The program also welcomes dialogue with health systems exploring the development of similar high-acuity integrated inpatient services.

Names of contributors:

- Gregg Robbins-Welty, MD, MSc, HEC-C
- Nathan Scheiner, MD, MA
- Jed Mangal, MD, MEd, FAPA, FACP
- Katerina Saker, MD
- John Deppe, MD
- Elizabeth McCord, MD
- Lalita Movva, MD
- Lauren Gensler, MD

WELLNESS COMMITTEE



Thanks to the department's donations, the wellness committee was able to assemble 300 blessing bags at a little over \$5 a piece! Each drawstring bag contained nail clippers, toothbrushes, toothpaste, tissues, hand warmers, trail mix packets, flashlights, bottled water, wet wipes, alcohol wipes, hand sanitizer, condoms, mini notebooks and pens, antibiotic ointment packets, bandages, emergency blankets, socks, Ziploc bags and handwritten notes.

Over 100 bags were delivered directly to unhoused individuals in Atlanta with additional bags delivered to Center Night Shelter/Bashor Homeless Shelter and churches. Bags were also given to committee members to hand out on their own.

We can't thank you all enough! Hopefully we can make this an annual tradition.



FACULTY KUDOS

Research

Druss B. Fifty Years On: The Enduring Relevance of General Systems Theory to Community Psychiatry. *Psychiatr Serv.* 2025 Dec 1;76(12):1125-1126. doi: 10.1176/appi.ps.20250346. Epub 2025 Oct 8. PMID: 41058256.

Oliver KI, Dahlgren K, Roeckner AR, Hinojosa CA, Santos JL, Taylor LS, ... and Stevens JS. (2025). [Exogenous estradiol modulates entorhinal cortex contributions to episodic encoding of conditioned threat in women](#). *Psychoneuroendocrinology*, 107709.

Sherrill AM, Mattioli DO, Schneider RL, Bell KM, Kee S, Wiese CW, Abdullah S, Ellis DM. Generative Artificial Intelligence for Exposure Therapy: Guidelines for Clinicians and Patients. *J Cogn Psychother*. 2025 Nov 12:JCP-2025-0036.R1. doi: 10.1891/JCP-2025-0036. Epub ahead of print. PMID: 41224513.

Stevens JS, Davis M, Hinojosa CA, Hinrichs R, Roeckner AR,... and Michopoulos V. (2025). [Hormonal mechanisms of women's risk in the face of traumatic stress](#). *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 122 (51) e2524903122.

Honors, Awards, Rankings

At their December graduation and awards ceremony, the Emory School of Medicine Physicians Assistant Program presented the Psychiatry Clerkship (Jeffrey Rakofsky, Michael Lucido, and Tamara Wright) with the "Rotation of the Year" award.

Media

John Constantino (1) Medical Xpress | [In Search for Autism's Causes, Look at Genes, Not Vaccines, Researchers Say](#).

Negar Fani (1) CBS News | [First-of-its-Kind Study at Emory University Tracks the Physical Toll of Racism](#). (2) Scientific American | [A Distorted Mind-Body Connection May Explain Common Mental Illnesses](#).

Education

Carly Thornhill, Mahsa Mojallal, Katie Skelton and Ronnise Owens participated as speakers at the Georgia Psychological Association of Graduate Students APPIC Internship Interview Prep Workshop.